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BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

COMPLETED

ORIGINAL

The Alternative Work Schedules Experiment: Congressional Oversight Needed To Avoid Likely Failure

Can the Federal Government successfully use flexible and compressed work schedules as alternatives to the traditional 8-hour day, 40-hour workweek? More than 250,000 Federal employees Nation-wide are participating in a 3-year voluntary experiment to find out.

If the experiment is a success, the Congress may modify laws to allow permanent use of alternative work schedules. Because the results of the experiment may significantly affect the work habits and patterns of all Federal employees, it is essential that the Congress have valid and reliable information on which to base its decision.

GAO believes that the experiment and evaluation, which OPM is currently conducting, will not yield the data the Congress needs. As a result, the experiment will fail to achieve its intended objectives. GAO makes a number of recommendations to OPM and the Congress to increase the likelihood that the experiment and evaluation will produce the results needed.

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

THE ALTERNATIVE WORK SCHEDULES EXPERIMENT: CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT NEEDED TO AVOID LIKELY FAILURE

D I G E S T

More than 250,000 Federal employees are participating in a 3-year, Nation-wide voluntary experiment to determine the effects of alternative work schedules, and to determine whether, and in what situations, the Federal Government can successfully use them. (See pp. 5 and 6.)

The experiment was authorized by the Federal Employees Flexible and Compressed Work Schedules Act of 1978. By March 1982, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is to report to the President and the Congress on the results of the experiment and recommend needed legislative and administrative actions.

The law requires OPM to assess the positive and negative effects of alternative work schedules on

--the efficiency of Government operations;

--mass transit facilities and traffic;

--energy consumption;

--service to the public;

--opportunities for full-time and part-time employment; and

--employees' morale, welfare, and family life.

The Congress authorized the use of alternative work schedules with the intent that OPM carefully design, control, and evaluate an experimental program. OPM has not carried out that mandate. (See pp. 2 and 3.)

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OPM officials told GAO that they lacked sufficient resources to carry out their mandated responsibilities in the most desirable manner. In fiscal year 1979 OPM funded the experiment by reallocating budgeted funds intended for other activities. For fiscal year 1980 the Congress funded less than one-half of OPM's $360,000 budget request for the work schedules project. As a result, OPM did not hire the number of specially trained employees which it believed were needed to effectively carry out its responsibilities of establishing and evaluating the experiment.

For example, as of May 1980, the alternative work schedules staff consisted of five of the 14 employees OPM felt were needed. Of the five, only two were trained in research and evaluation procedures.

Because OPM did not receive the funding requested and did not internally reallocate the additional funds necessary, it eliminated some tasks and reduced the scope of others. OPM has not

--reviewed and monitored agencies' work schedule plans to insure compliance with the act and its program regulations,

--issued program regulations and guidance in a timely manner,

--provided sufficient training to its coordinators and agency alternative work schedule coordinators, and

--developed accurate and reliable statistics on the number and type of work schedule experiments and the number of work units and employees using them. (See pp. 8-10.)

Because OPM has not performed these tasks, GAO believes it lacks the degree of control needed to carefully manage and evaluate the experiment. (See p. 13.)

AGENCIES VARY ALTERNATIVE
WORK SCHEDULES EXPERIMENTS

Because agencies' functions and missions differ, they were allowed to tailor alternative work schedules to their specific needs. (See p. 14.)

The methods agencies used to assess the feasibility of alternative work schedules and to design and implement them varied widely. Differences included the

--degree of employee, union, and individual work unit involvement;

--specific objectives of experiments; and

--degree of flexibility and freedom of choice for employees. (See pp. 14-18.)

GAO believes these differences affect the results of alternative work schedules and that OPM should consider these differences in its evaluation. (See p. 18.)

OPM's EVALUATION PLAN WILL NOT
PROVIDE THE NEEDED INFORMATION

GAO believes OPM's master plan for evaluating the experiment lacks important experimental control which will flaw the validity and reliability of the evaluation results. (See pp. 20 and 25.)

Although OPM is collecting a large quantity of information, the data and methods of analysis will not provide the valid and reliable information the Congress needs. (See pp. 20, 30, and 31.)

OPM has not:

--Reviewed individual work schedule plans to identify variables which affect experimental results.

--Used enough comparison groups to allow attribution of specific cause and effect relationships.

--Used scientific sampling procedures which would allow projection of findings and determination of whether such findings are representative.

--Used methods of analysis which allow consideration of the effects and interrelationships of different variables on alternative work schedule results.

--Considered the public's views about the effects of work schedules on the degree and quality of Government service to the public.

--Obtained pre-experimental data on the six areas to be studied. (See pp. 24-27.)

OPTIONS AVAILABLE

GAO believes the current experiment and evaluation will fail to provide the Congress with the valid and reliable information it needs on the positive and negative effects of alternative work schedules and the situations under which they may be used successfully. (See p. 30.)

Given the status and problems with the current experiment and evaluation, GAO believes four options exist. They are:

--Continue the current experiment and evaluation without change, accepting its weaknesses and limitations.

--Modify the existing experiment and evaluation to improve the quality of the evaluation results, while realizing that the data may not be representative.

--Develop a new evaluation approach to maximize the opportunity for providing the Congress with the needed data.

--Completely stop the alternative work schedules experiment.

GAO believes the first and last options are not desirable and advocates development of a new evaluation approach as the most desirable option. Although this option may require extending the experiment beyond 3 years, GAO believes it both necessary and desirable if the experiment's objectives are to be achieved. (See pp. 30 and 31.)

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DIRECTOR, OPM, AND THE CONGRESS

OPM should:

--Develop accurate and reliable statistics on the number and type of work schedule experiments and the number of work units and employees actually using them.

--Review a representative sample of work schedule plans to determine their technical accuracy, compliance with the act and OPM's regulations, and effects on the evaluation results. (See p. 13.)

--Work with the Congress in assessing the adequacy of the current master plan for evaluating the alternative work schedules experiment. OPM and the Congress must agree on (1) specific evaluation objectives, (2) criteria for measuring the attainment of those objectives, (3) costs and benefits of various analytical approaches, and (4) desired levels of precision and confidence. (See p. 32.)

--Reallocate funds and personnel to allow these recommendations to be accomplished effectively and timely. (See pp. 13 and 35.)

In considering the adequacy of the master plan, OPM and the Congress should assess

the need to (1) use scientific sampling procedures for projecting findings to the Federal work force, (2) analyze and compensate for multiple variables affecting alternative work schedule results, (3) use more comparison groups, and (4) consider public views about alternative work schedules and their effects on the degree and quality of service to the public. (See p. 32.)

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CONGRESS

Because of the importance of the experiment, and the fact that the Congress will eventually have to decide whether to allow the permanent use of alternative work schedules in the Federal Government, GAO recommends that the Congress hold oversight hearings to assess the adequacy of OPM's master plan. In conducting this oversight, the Congress should consider the

--need for, and costs and benefits associated with, modifying the existing master plan or developing a new one;

--necessity for extending the 3-year experiment; and

--desirability of establishing a joint executive agency task force to redesign and execute the master plan and to provide the needed experimental control. (See pp. 31 and 32.)

AGENCY COMMENTS

OPM said that resource limitations have made the job of implementing and evaluating the alternative work schedules experiment more difficult. However, OPM disagrees with GAO that the experiment and evaluation will not provide the valid and reliable information the Congress needs to determine the effects of alternative work schedules and how they may be used successfully and permanently.

Despite OPM's comments, GAO still believes that the experiment and its evaluation are inadequate and that changes are needed.

This is particularly true in light of the possible effect the outcome of the experiment could have on all Federal employees. (See app. V.)

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ABBREVIATIONS

AWS	alternative work schedule
GAO	General Accounting Office
OPM	Office of Personnel Management